

**COMMENTARY**

# Disrupting the social and time vacuum: A systemic and lifespan perspective on job insecurity

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**Abstract**

In their lead article, Klug et al. conceptualize job insecurity as a multilevel construct whereby individuals are situated in mesolevel and macrolevel contexts. In our article, we advocate deepening the current conceptual model with two partially intertwined perspectives. First, we suggest adding a systemic perspective at the mesolevel that considers individuals' nestedness in family and relationship systems, thus looking into how individuals' job insecurity affects close others (i.e., [romantic] partners and family members) and how close others affect individuals' experience of and reactions to job insecurity. To illustrate our propositions, we draw on the crossover model and the systemic-transactional model of stress processes within romantic couples. Second, we suggest adding a lifespan perspective that considers biographic time as a facet of the individual level in addition to historical time on the macrolevel. In doing so, we draw on the notion of path dependence and processes related to social learning. We advocate for future research taking into account the various, intertwined levels on which job insecurity operates to fully understand job insecurity as well as its consequences and remedies.

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**KEYWORDS**

career events, crossover, families, job insecurity, lifespan perspective

**INTRODUCTION**

By viewing job insecurity as an individual perception embedded in the broader social context, Klug et al. provide an excellent conceptualization of job insecurity as a multilevel phenomenon. Their model brings together the rich literature on job insecurity and highlights that the experience of job insecurity, as well as reactions to job insecurity, is affected not only by factors emanating from individuals' direct environment (= individual level) but also from different higher level contexts. We agree with their perspective that a multilevel conceptualization is highly important as it gives us a broader and more holistic understanding of the job insecurity experience. Moreover, this perspective highlights that factors that initially appear to be relatively distal from the individual (e.g., societal values) actually play a key role in shaping an individual's experience of job insecurity. A central contribution of a multilevel conceptualization is its expansion beyond psychology's classic focus on individual processes as it considers both the broader mesocontext and macrocontext that are able to influence individual experiences and behavior (e.g., Bliese & Jex, 2002; Sinclair et al., 2010). Indeed, many psychological theories revolve around the notion of individuals' being "nested" within higher level systems (Bronfenbrenner, 1993; Hobfoll, 2001; Lazarus, 2001). Yet, this aspect is oftentimes not explicitly modeled in empirical studies. Ultimately, understanding how job insecurity functions as a multilevel phenomenon helps us develop and implement more effective organizational and policy interventions.

With that in mind, we propose enhancing the existing conceptual model by incorporating two partially interconnected perspectives, namely, the systemic and lifespan perspectives. First, a *systemic perspective* at the mesolevel takes into account individuals' nestedness in family and relationship systems. This involves considering how an individual's job insecurity affects close others (i.e., [romantic] partners and family members) and, reciprocally, how those close others affect an individual's experience of and reactions to job insecurity. Second, a *lifespan perspective* incorporates biographical time as a facet of the individual level, in addition to considering historical time at the macrolevel. Both perspectives extend the current model by acknowledging the fact that (a) individuals do not live in a social vacuum but affect and are affected by others around them (Debus & Unger, 2017; Deng et al., 2018) and (b) individuals' histories and past experiences shape how they react to later life experiences.

**ADDING A SYSTEMIC PERSPECTIVE: CONSIDERING EFFECTS ON AND FROM CLOSE OTHERS ON THE JOB INSECURITY EXPERIENCE**

Arguably, one of the most fundamental human needs is the need to belong, or the innate desire for interpersonal relationships (e.g., Baumeister & Leary, 1995). Research has impressively demonstrated that people who hold close interpersonal relationships enjoy better well-being and health, more positive emotions (Le et al., 2018; Tang et al., 2020), and even extended

lifespans (Holt-Lunstad et al., 2010). Through our relationships, we can share our thoughts and feelings with others as well as give and receive help and support. Thus, individuals do not live in a social vacuum, rather their (work) experiences and reactions can have impact on other individuals and vice versa. Two of the most central interpersonal relationships that individuals have are with their partners and their family members (e.g., House et al., 1985), such as parents or children—and we argue that it is imperative to more explicitly embed these relationships in multilevel conceptualizations of job insecurity. In particular, we suggest integrating two complementary theoretical models that help us differentiate the underlying processes, the crossover model (Westman, 2001, 2006), and the systemic-transactional model of dyadic coping (STM, Bodenmann et al., 2016).

First, the crossover model (Westman, 2001, 2006) postulates that psychological states such as job insecurity and their behavioral, cognitive, and emotional consequences can be transmitted within close dyads. For instance, when a person experiences job insecurity, it might cross over to a close other who then experiences job insecurity as well. Westman (2001) outlines three mechanisms to explain this process: (1) direct, (2) indirect, and (3) spurious crossover. *Direct crossover* occurs when a person's psychological state elicits the same psychological state in a close other through empathy. In fact, job insecurity may be “contagious” within close dyads because a person expressing job insecurity might make the topic more salient for the close other. *Indirect crossover* is the intra-dyadic transmission of psychological states mediated by the “sending” person's affected behavior, cognition, and emotions. This means a person's job insecurity could coincide with a more pessimistic view of the economy, potentially triggering their close other to have a similar perception of job insecurity. *Spurious crossover* refers to a scenario where psychological states are not actually transmitted from one person to another; instead, a third variable causes both people in the close dyad to experience the same psychological state. This scenario is relevant to job insecurity research because macrolevel and mesolevel events such as recessions and mergers and acquisitions could affect both individuals in a close dyad, particularly if they are work-linked, that is, if both partners work in the same workplace or occupation (e.g., Halbesleben et al., 2012). Finally, in an earlier study, we extended this line of crossover research, which predominantly sheds light on the main and mediated effects of stressors, and investigated how both partners' job insecurity interact to predict strain (Debus & Unger, 2017). In a sample of mixed-gender dual-earner couples, we found that wives' job insecurity strengthens the husbands' negative reactions to job insecurity, whereas the reciprocal effect was not significant. Importantly, this result alludes to the necessity of investigating job insecurity as a gendered experience.

Second, a complementary perspective to crossover is offered by the STM and is focused on how romantic partners cope with stress. The model represents a dyadic extension of Lazarus' (Lazarus, 2001; Lazarus & Folkman, 1984) transactional stress model and postulates that partners provide support to each other—referred to as dyadic coping—when they perceive the other is suffering from stressors with the aim of reducing the burden (Bodenmann et al., 2016). Such support provision occurs because partners are able to empathize with each other and care about each other's well-being. In contrast to the crossover perspective, the STM focuses on the partner's efforts to help the focal individual better cope with stressors like job insecurity. Bodenmann et al. (2016) propose four forms of dyadic coping that couples can engage in, supportive, delegated, negative, and joint dyadic coping. By engaging in supportive dyadic coping, one partner offers problem-focused (e.g., giving advice) or emotion-focused (e.g., showing empathy and understanding) support to their job-insecure counterpart. By engaging in delegated dyadic coping, one partner assumes additional responsibilities to reduce

their job-insecure partner's stress. This could involve them taking care of household duties thus affording their job-insecure partner the time to search for alternative employment opportunities. Conversely, negative dyadic coping occurs when one partner engages in hostile, ambivalent, and insincere behaviors that have harmful intentions. As an example, a partner might criticize their job-insecure counterpart for not having pursued a different career path in the first place. Lastly, joint dyadic coping occurs when both partners experience job insecurity and work collaboratively to handle this stressful situation. This might involve contemplating together alternative employment opportunities and/or relocation.

The STM has amassed an impressive amount of research in the field of clinical psychology, examining how couples cope with stressors that range from daily hassles to severe, chronic stressors (e.g., severe illnesses; for an overview, see Falconier et al., 2016). Meta-analytic evidence shows that positive forms of dyadic coping are positively related to relationship satisfaction, whereas negative dyadic coping is negatively related to relationship satisfaction (Falconier et al., 2015). Applied psychology has rarely used the model (for an exception, see Chariatte et al., 2023), yet we consider it a highly pertinent theoretical framework for enhancing our understanding of how couples cope with job insecurity. By differentiating between individual-focused versus joint forms of dyadic coping, the model acknowledges the variability in how job insecurity affects couples. Job insecurity can be an issue for one partner such that they experience job insecurity and their counterpart helps them to cope. However, it could also be an issue for both members of the couple such that both partners concurrently experience job insecurity and find ways to cope with the situation together.

## **ADDING A LIFESPAN PERSPECTIVE: CONSIDERING THE EFFECTS OF EARLIER LIFETIME EXPERIENCES AND EVENTS ON JOB INSECURITY**

A lifespan perspective (e.g., Baltes et al., 2019; Staudinger & Lindenberger, 2003) in the context of job insecurity draws attention to the fact that earlier biographical experiences and events can impact individuals' experience of later job insecurity. In particular, we argue that earlier biographical experiences can affect (a) individuals' likelihood to experience job insecurity, thus creating path dependence (see Dlouhy & Biemann, 2018) toward experiencing job insecurity, and (b) how individuals react to later experiences of job insecurity. Such a perspective overcomes the predominant contemporaneous perspective that focuses on factors and boundary conditions happening at the same point in time (Shipp & Jansen, 2011, see also Cheng & Chan, 2008).

Regarding path dependence, unemployment research (Meng et al., 2017; Oreopoulos et al., 2008) spurs us to speculate that parents' as well as one's own past job insecurity experiences can increase an individual's likelihood of job insecurity at a later point in time. Archival data of 39,000 father-son dyads showed that paternal layoff was positively linked to the likelihood of sons receiving unemployment benefits at a later point in time (Oreopoulos et al., 2008). This result points to the possibility that job insecurity could be "inherited" within families because job insecurity is likely to precede spells of unemployment. Possible explanations for this effect may be poorer academic performance and well-being, as well as weaker work motivation of children with job-insecure parents (Barling et al., 1999; Barling & Mendelson, 1999; Lim & Sng, 2006). Furthermore, biographical experiences of job insecurity may have similar effects. Unemployment research supports the notion that unemployment

breeds unemployment (Meng et al., 2017); thus, past job insecurity could be linked to future job insecurity. An explanation for this is the scarring hypothesis of unemployment: individuals who have experienced unemployment in the past face enduring negative well-being effects, even after they secure reemployment (Clark et al., 2001; Luhmann & Eid, 2009). This lingering impact could also have detrimental effects on career outcomes. Moreover, individuals who have previously experienced job insecurity may become more perceptive to job insecurity cues in the future.

Regarding the second mechanism, such reasoning would suggest that earlier biographical experiences would act as boundary conditions in the job insecurity–outcome link. In line with this, social learning theory (Bandura, 1977) draws attention to the crucial impact of role models on how individuals cope and deal with obstacles in their lives. For example, having witnessed one's parents suffer from job insecurity or unemployment may sensitize individuals such that if they experience job insecurity in their own career, they may react more negatively to the situation. Stress sensitization is a process that has been discussed extensively in the context of affective disorders. Research has shown that earlier adverse experiences increase the likelihood of individuals developing affective disorders later in life (e.g., posttraumatic stress disorder, anxiety disorders, bipolar disorder, and disordered drug use; Dienes et al., 2006; McLaughlin et al., 2010; Myers et al., 2014). Over time, individuals become sensitized to stress such that minor or non-severe stressors easily trigger more severe stress reactions. However, it is also plausible that when individuals witness their parents effectively navigate job insecurity or unemployment—either by successfully looking for a new job, opting for a different career path that leads to more work satisfaction, or successfully starting their own business. In these instances, an “inoculation” effect may occur, leading individuals to react less negatively (and perhaps even more proactively) to their own job insecurity. To date, there is initial evidence suggesting that parents' job insecurity negatively affects their children's work beliefs, work attitudes and school performance (Barling et al., 1998, 1999; Barling & Mendelson, 1999). This underscores the importance of future research to investigate the longevity of these effects.

Additionally, it is conceivable that earlier career experiences may sensitize or inoculate individuals toward later job insecurity experiences. For example, individuals who have previously experienced a layoff in their career may remember these experiences when confronted with job insecurity in the future, thus reacting more negatively to the situation (see Appelbaum et al., 1997, on the survivor syndrome). Conversely, it is also possible that individuals who successfully navigated past periods of unemployment in their career (e.g., finding a new job quickly and having received helpful advice and social support) could have developed effective coping strategies. Such reasoning would suggest that individuals might react less negatively (in terms of well-being) and perhaps employ more adaptive coping strategies when confronted with job insecurity later in their careers.

## CONCLUSION

Job insecurity is a multilevel phenomenon, and we agree with Klug et al.'s conceptualization that it is imperative to view the individual as embedded in a mesolevel and a macrolevel context. We suggest deepening their perspective by adding a systemic perspective at the mesolevel and a lifespan perspective at the individual level. By doing so, we acknowledge the fact that job-insecure individuals affect and are affected by others around them, specifically their partners and family members. Furthermore, we recognize the impact of an individual's

history and past experiences in shaping how they react to subsequent experiences of job insecurity. To more fully understand job insecurity, its consequences and remedies, we advocate for future research to explore the various, intertwined levels on which job insecurity can operate.

### CONFLICT OF INTEREST STATEMENT

The author declares that they do not have any conflict of interest.

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